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C O N F I D E N T I A L ASMARA 000247

DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E, AF/EX, AND EEB/CIP/BA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/01/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [ER](#)

SUBJECT: ERITREAN OFFICIAL ON BILATERAL TIES, SOMALIA

REF: A. ASMARA 187

[1](#)B. ASMARA 239

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Rewinding the tape to before the August 08 Djibouti Process is the best way to mend Somalia, contends key regime insider Yemane Ghebreab. While robustly denying that Eritrea supports Somali jihadists, Yemane said Eritrea favors an all-parties meeting that would form the basis of a united Somali transitional government, including Puntland and Somaliland. Isaias was initially uncharacteristically enthusiastic on the Obama administration, Yemane said, but has tired of waiting for a "gesture" that the U.S. is serious about re-engaging with Eritrea. The reason Isaias refused to take a call from the Secretary, Yemane proffered, was that he hates to talk on the telephone and didn't want to "get off on the wrong foot" with her. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) ERITREA AND SOMALIA

Yemane Ghebreab, director of political affairs of Eritrea's ruling (and only) party, met August 3 with the ambassador to review bilateral relations and Somalia. Yemane religiously reiterated Eritrea's Flat Denial (Ref A) of support for Somali radical Islamists, maintaining that Eritrea had "not sent one bullet to extremists." He claimed that when SRSG Ould-Abdullah publicly stated there was no evidence of Eritrean support for radicals, not one country or group contradicted him and came forward with any proof. Yemane argued that regional states and pro-TFG elements are biased against Eritrea and were passing us a load of mis- and disinformation. The ambassador noted that many Somali participants (including some former clients of Eritrea), as well as most regional governments tell us that Eritrean support to extremists continues.

-- Yemane claimed the U.S. was again following the "failed path of 2006," by backing one narrow Somali group. "Every one of the warlords in your 2006 coalition is now backing the TFG," Yemane averred. He argued that the TFG has "100 times" more resources than the opposition, yet can't make headway because it is unpopular and narrowly based.

-- He said Eritrea favors a big-tent conference of all Somali groups that would yield a legitimate, united, and peaceful transitional government representing all of Somalia, including Somaliland and Puntland. He intimated that the Isaias regime could probably convince Hizbul Islam to participate. Yemane said Isaias sees constructive U.S. involvement as crucial to solving the region's many problems; the ambassador opined that Isaias seems more interested in backing Sheikh Aweys' bid for power than being on better terms with the United States.

13. (C) YEMANE TASKED WITH SPEARHEADING U.S. ENGAGEMENT

After the November U.S. elections, Isaias had high hopes that the U.S. would re-engage with Eritrea. Yemane revealed that Isaias personally asked him to lead efforts at re-engagement with the United States, even though Isaias was now disappointed in the lack of "a gesture" from the new U.S. administration. The lack of positive response to the POTUS-Isaias letter, the refusal of Isaias to take a call from the Secretary, and the lack of an Eritrean visa for the AF Assistant Secretary--these could all be seen as Isaias regime rebuffs to the new administration, the ambassador observed. Peace Corps, USAID, DAO, the Security Assistance program, and a large cultural affairs program had all been shut down by Isaias, the ambassador stated, so how about "a gesture" from Eritrea? Yemane said we needed to keep talking. The ambassador said that's difficult when Isaias won't pick up the phone or allow senior administration officials to visit.

14. (C) POTENTIAL 1844 LISTING

Regarding his inclusion on the list of the Somali Monitoring Group's possible targets for sanctions, Yemane replied, "It is really perplexing, but is of little concern. If I don't have to travel so much, I can spend more time with my kids. I would miss browsing in Borders Books with a good cup of coffee, though."

15. (SBU) EMBASSY RESTRICTIONS

Embassy Asmara has had a stretch of several months of relatively smooth delivery of diplomatic pouches and good issuance rates of Eritrean visas for USG TDY visitors. However, Post has received only one in-country travel permit since April. When the ambassador complained vociferously about this, Yemane seemed surprised, adding that he thought the Eritrean government had decided to loosen or abolish the travel permit requirement. He said he'd look into this and expected a liberalization of diplomatic travel. The ambassador thanked Yemane for his pivotal role in winning the release of an arrested Amcit LES (ref B).

16. (C) THE ALGIERS ACCORDS AND ETHIOPIA

Yemane said he didn't know why the Claims Commission (parallel to the Border Commission established by the Algiers Accords) has been so tardy in releasing its findings about liabilities for damages arising from the 1998-00 Border War. He asked if the United States was going to press Ethiopia to implement the Border Commission decision. The ambassador said Eritrea and Ethiopia should talk directly about how to implement the border ruling. He observed that due to concerns about the 2010 Ethiopian elections, some people thought that seeking a major concession from Ethiopia at this point might be politically ill-timed. Yemane guffawed and told an Eritrean joke; "When asked why Addis Ababa didn't keep its word on the border ruling, a senior Ethiopian official explained that Prime Minister Meles' grandmother was sick and if Ethiopia was forced to give back Badme now, the old lady might die."

17. (C) COMMENT: Yemane's amiable manner fosters the notion that he is a reasonable "moderate" inside the Isaias regime; some Europeans seek to work to engage and bolster this seemingly moderate element. In fact, despite his low-key, professorial demeanor, Yemane is a deceptively hard-line Isaias regime true believer. Post appreciates the fact that he remains very accessible and at times helpful to Embassy Asmara, in stark contrast to almost every other senior regime official. End Comment.

MCMULLEN